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ST. PAUL'S CONVERSION.

BEING THE

SUBSTANCE

OF A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED AT

PLYMOUTH in DEVONSHIRE,

In the YEAR 1744.

By JOHN CENNICK.

- "He preaches the faith which once he destroyed." Gal. i. 23.
- "Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious, but obtained mercy." 1 Tim. i. 13.
- "As a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Christ to everlasting life." 1 Tim. i. 26.

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A C T S xxii. 16.

And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized and wash away thy Sins, calling upon the Name of the Lord.

WITH these words Ananias concludes his message to Saul. He told him, the Lord Jesus that had appeared to him in the way, had chosen him to be his minister, and would give him an inheritance with those who through faith in him were sanctified, and laying his hands upon him, he received his sight, which had left him at the time of the heavenly vision, and he arose, was baptized, and God revealed his dear Son in him, giving him in that instant remission of sins and the Holy Ghost.

The sudden and glorious manner of this great man's conversion was extraordinary, and is one of the clearest instances of the free-grace and salvation of God. He had been educated a zealous Jew, and his life was according to the strictest order of that religion, but, like many of his time, ignorant of the redemption and of the righteousness of faith; and therefore out of his Jewish zeal a bitter persecutor of the christians, and those who called upon Christ's name. He understood, that the disciples worshipped as the true God the Son of Mary. or, as he was called by way of reproach, the Nazarene, the Tolah, that is, the hanged-one, and that they seemed no more to esteem the righteousness of works as formerly, but made his righteousness their hope and doctrine, and preached salvation, repentance, and remission of sins in his name; and so strove against them with all his might, and went so far as to assist at the murdering of Stephen, to whose

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death

death he consented, and kept their cloaths who stoned him. He was born in Tarsus, a city of Celicia; and though a Jew, and the son of a strict Jew, was a free man of the empire. He was taught the languages, and instructed in the Jews religion at Jerusalem under the care of a learned doctor of the Pharisees named Gamaliel, but by trade was a tent-maker. His learning and zeal procured him great favour in the Sanhedrim, and in the court of the high-priest, of whom he obtained authority to search out the followers of Jesus, and to put them in irons, and send them to be punished, and this he did, not only in Jerusalem, but in other parts; and some he caused to be scourged, some he forced to fly their towns and country, and many men and women he haled to prisons, whom he found calling upon the name of Jesus; and some he compelled to blaspheme or deny Christ. The threatening of slaying and putting them to death, and the havock he made daily in every house made the disciples every where afraid, and his very name struck a terror where it came: so that all but the apostles, who abode at Jerusalem were scattered abroad because of the persecution. Encouraged by this success, he got again letters of authority to make an inquisition in the city of Damascus, and to aid and assist him, had procured men, and that very likely of the Roman army, to go with him. Thus far the Lord suffered him, but before he entered the city, he was arrested from heaven. At noon or middle of the day, a light shone brighter than the sun upon them, and struck all down to the earth; and as they lay, a voice was heard in the Hebrew tongue, which none understood but himself, his companions being either Greeks or Romans, saying, "Saul, Saul, why per-

persecutest thou me? and he answered, Who art thou Lord? and the Lord said, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and affrighted cried out, Lord what wilt thou have me to do? and the Lord said, arise and go into Damascus, and it shall be told thee what thou shalt do."

All the men saw the light and were also afraid, and they heard the voice, but as it was in another language they understood nothing, and when they had helped up Saul, and he had opened his eye-lids, he found he was blind and could see nothing, and therefore was led into the city to the house of Judas, where he continued in the utmost spiritual distress and could neither eat nor drink for three days, but abode crying, "Lord what shall I do:" Till Jesus sent Ananias to him with the glad news, that the same Lord that had appeared to him on his journey had loved him and opened for him the fountain of his blood, that he might wash and be clean: "And now, saith Ananias, why tarriest thou? arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling upon the name of the Lord." This he did, and at once received the sight of his bodily and spiritual eyes, and knew he was God's chosen vessel and dear child. I wish to God all that hear me were in the same happy condition.

I have now mentioned what was most material in the life of this apostle till our Saviour met him; but I may not stop here, without making some remarks upon a conversion so very particular, for thereof undoubtedly have we such an account, that we may learn much thereby, and be confirmed in our own experience of grace, and in the doctrines of Christ's free mercy.

In St. Paul's strict life and extraordinary zeal before

fore he knew Ananias, we may see how far a person may go, and be a stranger to the right way. For my part, I do not know if any one ever yet carried the matter of self-righteousness farther than he, or was more zealous for the law of God, the religion of his fathers; and works of piety than he. If any could have been saved by works of righteousness which they had done, he would have gone to heaven that way, because therein he exceeded: but he knew by experience that doctrine of Christ, "Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees you can in no case enter the kingdom of God."

What can be said by any which could not be said of him? and if any might glory, he more: he was a child of Abraham of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised the eighth day according to the commandment; zealous for the law above many in Jerusalem. After the strictest sect of his religion he lived a Pharisee, and was the son of a pharisee, lived as touching the law blameless, and before God in all good conscience. Religiously attached to the traditions of the fathers he fasted twice in the week, gave alms of all he possessed, and was not an ignorant person, or a man that wanted a capacity to judge in divine matters, but was on that account famous in the church, and in favour with the chief priests and elders. Perhaps if he had lived in our times he would have been canonized and reputed a saint; and no doubt, his acquaintance, and such as knew him thought him such, and when they saw such a pious and religious man in trouble of mind about his soul, and saw him weep and cry day and night, and not eat or drink, doubtless they thought, poor Saul is delirious, he is gone beside himself, much learning, or much religion hath made him mad. Would to God
all

all who hear me were like him, notwithstanding all the good opinions they have of themselves, till they knew a better righteousness than all his.

As soon as our Saviour had called to him, and his heart was awakened, he saw all he had done was nothing, "and counted it all dung and dross that he might win Christ and be found in him, not having his own righteousness which was of the law, but the righteousness which is through faith in Christ."

With all his knowledge and zeal and boast of belonging to the ancient and then the only church of God, what good did it do him? he did not yet know if he should be saved. All the vain and high thoughts of being righteous or holier than another, or being of the best and purest religion, strictness of life, and performing many duties; without the conviction in the heart that yet we are poor, vile dust and ashes, and must be saved through mere mercy only serves to exalt the proud nature, and teach them to persecute. The most shocking scenes of persecution that have ever been seen, have been carried on by people who were zealous and fiery for their own way, but such as did not know the meek spirit of Jesus, the Prince of peace, "who came not into the world to destroy men's lives, but to save them." It was the rigid opinion St. Paul had of the Jews being only right, that made him so hot against the christians; and it is remarkable our Saviour took all as done to him. "Who so touches his saints touches the apple of his eye. What they do to them is done to him, and it would be better to have a millstone hanged about one's neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea, than offend one of the little ones who believe in him." I have observed often when some persons who are self-righteous and conceited about their own way, have gone so far as to persecute, at once they do

do not know what they do : they forget all humanity, good manners, kin or affinity, and can be barbarous and cruel without mercy. Thus was it with our apostles, he scourged people in the synagogues, drove fathers and mothers from their families and homes, and was properly a murderer, and had a hand in Stephen's death. Oh ! may the Lamb of God keep us in his lamb-like spirit, that when we go out in his warfare, our weapons may be never any other than spiritual, such as meekness, love, mercy, intreaties, faith and patience : " so shall we be the children of our Father which is in heaven."

The Lord suffered St. Paul to come nigh Damascus, and I do not doubt all who loved not the disciples began to triumph over them, and tell them, now soon their religion would be at an end : and it would have been so if Jesus himself had not been the rock and chief corner-stone of their building, and against which he had said, " the gates of hell shall not prevail." Let not any then, however few in number, or mean, or threatened, or persecuted, be afraid : their strength is to sit still, and they shall see the Lord's salvation. He shall fight their battles, the Captain of our salvation shall go before them, and be in their rereward. Fear not them that can kill the body, and after that can do no more : nor be startled and offended if the world should oppose and blaspheme : no, though the kings of the earth stood up, and the princes took counsel together. The cause is the Lord's. It is not of the world, for then the world would love its own. Be therefore quiet, and be ready to lose all and to be rejected of all men, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Comfort yourselves when even your masters and relations should be against you, and think, when my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up. So persecuted

secuted they the prophets which were before you. The apostles and disciples of Jesus and all the noble army of martyrs went that way to their rest.

I observed before that Paul came nigh to Damascus; and just before he entered the city gates, a light from heaven struck him and his company to the earth. How justly might the same hand have struck him to hell? mercy, free mercy, alone ordered it thus, while he lay upon the earth in a fright, Jesus spoke to him. It is his way to bring down before he exalts, and he "was set for the falling and rising again of many in Israel." He first smites the heart, overturns all the self-righteousness, and whatever we counted good in us, and does by us as he did once by Ezekiel, he leads us (as it were) into the deep recesses of the wicked heart, and shews us all our sinfulness, sets in order before us all we had done amiss, and says, "Come and I will shew thee greater abominations than these," and asks us, "Why persecutest thou me?" thus he spake to Paul, as if he had said, what harm have I done to thee, that thou art mine enemy, why dost thou fight against me, why persecutest thou me? think, ye drunkards, ye swearers and liars, ye whoremongers and adulterers, as if Jesus spoke them to you. Think how he looks grieved upon you, as he did once upon poor cursing and swearing Peter, and asks you, "Why persecutest thou me?" why dost thou crucify me afresh, and put me to an open shame? attend to him, be sorry, and go and weep bitterly before him, and be forgiven.

As soon as our Saviour spoke, it went through Paul's heart. He thought before he was defending God's true religion, but now was in the greatest confusion, nor knew who it was that thus spoke; and therefore asked, "Who art thou Lord?" here

may see, with all his religion, he did not know God, but was an entire stranger to the Lord that bought him. Our Saviour did not say to him, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of your fathers; for then Paul had answered, Lord, I am not persecuting thee, I am only opposing one Jesus and his followers, who is worshipped among them instead of thee. I am only engaged in thy cause against this new religion: Therefore said the Lord, I am Jesus, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest." If he was affrighted before and astonished, now he must tremble every limb, and be ready to sink into the earth with terror. Yes, for now he knew that Jesus was the Lord: that the despised Son of the carpenter at Nazareth, who lately hung like a felon upon the tree, and died in such shame and torture, was God over all! and then, like a poor sinner, he made his first right prayer that ever he made in his life, and said to that Jesus he had so abhorred and hated, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" Methinks I see him lift up his trembling hands, and with floods of tears beg for mercy. He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but sunk under the conviction and strove no more. It should seem by our Saviour's saying, "it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks," that he had done much of it against the tender rebukes and checks of the Holy Spirit, and the pricks of his own conscience. Whoever so acts shall find it hard indeed, for they will bring such calamities and distresses upon their own poor souls, as no creature can form an idea of, but him that does it: Not perhaps at the time they do so, for God's Spirit appears grieved and retires oft, but the end shall prove he is stronger than we, and "If a man will not turn, he will whet his sword, and bend his bow, and send out his arrows against the

the persecutors," which shall pierce to the very heart and reins.

This is also to be observed, that the Lord spake to Paul in a language none knew but himself, just so when God's word, like a two edged sword, speaks to a sinner in his sins, he understands, but perhaps many may be with him at the time and understand nothing about it, but wonder at his fears and concern, and persuade him there is nothing; "Be of good cheer," but he is too sure of the contrary, and will never rest till, like Matthew when Jesus called him, he rises up, leaves all, and follows him.

Our Saviour had bid Paul go into Damascus, and promised him "there it shall be told thee what thou shalt do:" It seems he had hitherto lain still, and was waiting with an aching heart to see if Jesus would not cause the earth next to open her mouth and swallow him up and let his soul go quick down to hell: But now he arose and was led blind into the city, where his grief and concern was so great, he could not be comforted, nor persuaded to eat or drink for three days, but continued praying to our Saviour, and saying, "Lord what wilt thou have me to do? What shall I do to be saved?" So long God heard from his holy temple his cries, and so long suffered his tears, but now becomes his Saviour.

He did not immediately preach his mind to him, but would have him hear it from a man like himself, so the angel did not tell Cornelius what he should do, but bid him "send for Peter who should tell him words whereby he should be saved." This is to teach us not to despise the foolishness of preaching, for thereby the only wise God has decreed to save them that believe; nor to slight his ministers, they are poor and weak men, and are properly but vessels of earth; but they are God's ambassadors, they are his messengers of salvation. To

To one of these, namely Ananias, "a devout man according to the law, and of good report among the Jews," but now a disciple, the Lord appeared in a certain manner, and bid him go to Saul of Tarsus, in the house of Judas, and in such a street, and shew him his salvation. Ananias was afraid to do this, so great a terror had Saul's name struck to him, and therefore said, "Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints in Jerusalem; and here has he authority from the chief-priests to bind all that call upon thy name." But the Lord quieted his servant, and allayed his fears by telling him, "He is my chosen vessel, and shall bear my name to the Gentiles, and to kings, and the children of Israel:" And hastens Ananias away, saying, "Behold he prayeth!" As if he had said, My child make haste, for his cries have reached mine ears, and I cannot longer withstand his tears and prayers. Behold he prayeth! I must help him. This day will I shew him my salvation. And now Ananias came and found him out, and begun thus, "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, has sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." I dare say as soon as Paul heard Ananias call him brother, the tears gushed out of his eyes afresh, and he might think, O how unworthy am I to be called a brother, who have persecuted and wasted the church of God! But yet it must comfort him at the same time, to hear, for all his sin, the Lord would yet become a Father to him, and Jesus would count him among his brethren, Also as the Lord had revealed himself to him on the way by his new name, so Ananias begins his message with the doctrine of Christ's divinity, saying, "The Lord, even Jesus, has sent me" to thee.

thee. This was joyful news, this was glad tidings indeed to a soul in his condition, ready to perish and without comfort, that Jesus the Lord had sent to him. While Ananias spoke and delivered his errand he laid his hands upon Paul, and immediately his sight was restored, and the light of the day, and the light of the Sun of righteousness at once arose upon him. Then Ananias spoke to him after this manner, And now brother Saul, Jesus has set before thee an open door into his kingdom. He loves thee, and will make thee his minister and witness : This day shalt thou see his salvation and be filled with the Holy Ghost. His arms are now open to embrace thee, and his precious blood to wash thee, " Why tarriest thou ! Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling upon the name of the Lord." And he joyfully arose and was baptized, and received the blessed witness in his heart, that Jesus loved him and had given himself for him. Thus shall it happen to all that call upon the name of Jesus in faith, and none shall pray to him in vain.

I have now related some of the most weighty circumstances of St. Paul's conversion, and also made some remarks which I thought needful, I come now to speak of the text, and to bring that good news to you which Ananias brought to him.

The Lord, even Jesus, sends me with a commission to preach the gospel of repentance and remission of sins to you. He is your Saviour, he has loved and died for you ; his wounds, like fountains, have been hewn and cut open for you ; his blood and sweat streamed down like a river to make you clean, and he and his Spirit invites you to come and wash. " And now why tarry ye ? Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling upon the name of the Lord."

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There is this idea in the text, this divine purport and meaning, All things are ready : A redemption is obtained : A kingdom is purchased ; up and take possession. It is as if the Lord said to you, Ye are sinners, poor perishing and undone sinners, but I have prepared a salvation for you : A remedy as great as the disease : A salve as great and broad as the sore. I have opened a healing bath, come and be baptized, I have opened a fountain for sin and uncleanness, waters which shall satiate your thirst after righteousness, streams that shall overflow and blot out the hand-writing, the threatenings and curses that were against you : Floods that will wash away your sins, and cleanse the heart, the soul, the mind, and make a full end of all your iniquities ; wherefore then do ye linger, or why do ye tarry ? Call upon my name, call upon me your Jesus, your Lord, "and I will hear you and deliver you, and ye shall glorify me."

"Arise," that is, lift up your hearts to the Redeemer ! "Lift up your eyes to the hill Calvary, whence cometh your help." See him with outstretched arms interceding for you, see him ready to embrace and bless you, read your names in his hands, the iron pens graved them there ; see his raw back which has carried your burdens, his sore and aching head which has carried away the curse of the ground, and above all see how he has loved you ! "Arise," hang down and droop thy head no more as if no balm was in Gilead, or as if there was no physician there that could heal thee ; though thou art a poor prodigal child, and hast been feeding upon the husks, the pleasures and vanities of a sinful world, thou hast a Father that loves thee, arise and go to him. Thou hast a dear Saviour whose wounds will
heal.

heal thy spoiled and poisoned nature. Thou hast the
 "Holy Ghost who will lead thee and comfort thee as
 a mother comforteth her only son." "Arise," leave
 thy sins, thy lusts, thy dangerous place, and venture
 to come to the sinner's refuge, and it shall go well
 with thee.

"Be baptized," be immersed and covered in the
 bloody sweat of Jesus, be baptized with the baptism
 wherewith he was baptized, those great drops which
 fell from him in his agony shall wash away thy great
 crimes and frightful offences. Hast thou not been
 already baptized with water in his name, but since
 "gone like a dog to his vomit, and as a swine that
 was washed to her wallowing in the mire?" Now
 come and let the great Apostle and Bishop of our souls
 baptize thee "with the Holy Ghost and with fire."

"Wash away thy sins," that is, come to the blood
 of the Lamb. No Jordan, no pool of Siloam, no Be-
 thesda is like it. If you had wept over your sins bit-
 terly like Peter, or Magdalene, or David, and added
 to it the blood of ten thousand rams and bulls, and
 even all the blood of the martyrs, yet your deep in-
 bred sin would remain like scarlet-in-grain, nothing
 would be able to cancel or wash it away, but one
 drop of the blood of God's Son, Jesus, shall cleanse
 you from all sin in a moment, and this was really
 shed for you. The sole aim our Saviour had in dy-
 ing and bleeding was to open a river of life in his
 blood for you. Whoever comes to this laver, to this
 fountain, though his sins were more than the hairs
 of his head, or the sands upon the sea-shore, all shall
 be washed away and remembered no more: and tho'
 his crimes were the most vile and abominable, so that
 his heart failed him, yet the blood of Christ shall
 make him whiter than the snow in Salmon, and sof-
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ten and melt his hard and icy nature, and speak peace and pardon to his guilty conscience.

“Calling upon the name of the Lord,” this is to direct you where to apply, to whom you may address yourselves and make your requests, namely, to the Lord Jesus that appeared to Paul in the way. He is the Friend of sinners. He is the Minister of the true sanctuary, who hears prayer, and has the tenderest heart. Ask of him and he will give you, seek to him and you shall find, knock at that door of the sheep-fold, and you shall find entrance by the new and living way of his flesh and blood, into the holiest place of all.

I do not doubt but when Paul was a Jew, he had prayed like the other Pharisees often, and made long prayers, but the scripture takes no notice at all of their being heard or regarded, but as soon as he turned to our Saviour and applied to him, he made haste to help him. So as soon as blind Bartimeus called upon his name, he stood still and could not go on till he had shewed him mercy; so the Syrophenician woman, the lepers, the dying thief, when they sought to him, found mercy at his hands, and are witnesses that “whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus shall be saved.

Jesus himself bids us ask of him, his prophets and apostles press the same thing, and we find all the primitive church, from Stephen, calling upon his name. Let then such as doubt his divinity pray to others, and be ashamed to sue for mercy to one who hanged on a tree: let them tire themselves and labour in vain, who call on another name, but let us who are called by the name of our Lord God Christ Jesus, call in faith, and feel and know there is no God that can deliver like our God. Amen.

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